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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1983, Commissioner Lutjeharms authorized the appointment of a committee to study kindergarten programs in Nebraska schools and to formulate recommendations for needed improvements. The committee, in the course of its work, examined pertinent current professional literature and, with the assistance of Department of Education staff, surveyed the attitudes and practices of public school kindergarten teachers. This position statement on kindergarten by the Nebraska State Board of Education briefly reviews historical changes in kindergarten programs, discusses desirable characteristics of kindergarten programs and important outcomes of kindergarten, and offers recommendations for improving kindergarten programs to the State Department of Education, the Nebraska Council on Teacher Education, approved teacher training institutions, central administration and building level administrators in local school districts, kindergarten teachers, and parents of preschool and kindergarten-age children. (RH)

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Nebraska State Board of Education

POSITION STATEMENT ON KINDERGARTEN

Adopted October, 1984

Issued by
NEBRASKA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Division of School Assistance and Support

Joe E. Lutjeharms
Commissioner of Education

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The Department of Education wishes to recognize the diligent effort and good counsel of the committee members who assisted staff members of the Department in the development of this position statement.

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Nebraska State Board of Education
POSITION STATEMENT ON KINDERGARTEN
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Introduction

Nebraska has a long history of providing kindergarten programs for the young children of the state. Both the Constitution and state laws affirm the entitlement of all five-year-old children to receive free public education. The State Board of Education supports this legal entitlement and urges public schools to offer kindergarten programs without qualification to all eligible resident children and further to assure that kindergarten programs meet the developmental learning needs of the children they are designed to serve.

Changes in Kindergarten Programs

During the first two-thirds of this century, kindergarten programs were designed expressly for five-year-olds, curriculum decisions were based upon increasing knowledge about child development, and kindergarten teachers used content and methods appropriate for five-year-old children. In recent years a number of conflicting societal pressures and attitudes have caused changes in the focus of kindergarten programs. This shift in emphasis has caused many schools to begin to use content and methods unsuited to the learning needs of most five-year-old children, for whom kindergartens were originally designed. Commonly stated examples of these conflicting pressures include the following:

Five-year-old children are often perceived to be more advanced than they used to be. This perception causes many teachers and administrators to think that the kindergarten program should require mastery of content that was formerly expected in later primary grades. Many people also believe that today's children should be taught more at an earlier age so that they can keep up with expanding knowledge. BUT AT THE SAME TIME . . .

. . . many five-year-old children are judged to be unready for today's kindergarten program. A growing arm of the testing industry now provides a variety of instruments designed to ascertain whether children are likely to be successful in kindergarten. Ironically, at the same time that such tests are being used to discourage enrolling many "typical" five-year-olds in kindergarten, recent legislation assures that handicapped youngsters receive appropriate educational services, whether they are "ready" or not.

Many preschools and child care centers are now presenting inappropriate concepts and skills that were formerly taught in kindergarten or even first grade. This causes many people to believe that children who have been to preschool will be bored by kindergarten. BUT AT THE SAME TIME . . .

. . . many of the preschools, as well as the educational components of many child care centers, erroneously believe the center must "get children ready" for the more demanding kindergarten programs.

Unfortunately, children who have not attended a private preschool are increasingly, and often mistakenly, viewed as disadvantaged upon reaching kindergarten age. (The number of these programs is rapidly expanding in all sizes of communities across the state. They are often staffed by people who have no professional preparation to work with young children. In many instances these programs use content and methods entirely inappropriate for the three- and four-year-old children they serve.)

Parental pressure to teach reading earlier has contributed to changes in the kindergarten program in many communities. Parents often view the traditional activities of kindergarten as trivial and expect the school to "teach" children content formerly reserved for later in the school program. BUT AT THE SAME TIME . . .

. . . many parents decide against entering their five-year-olds in kindergarten because they are afraid their children won't be able to adjust to increased academic demands or to score well on standardized tests. Such parents are especially susceptible to suggestions by school personnel that children should wait a year or attend a preschool.

These conflicts cause confusion and create uncertainty among many parents, teachers, and administrators . . .

- Among parents because, with rare exceptions, they want what is best for their children. They put trust in educators to advise them.
- Among kindergarten teachers, who feel pressured by parents, by administrators, but especially by first grade teachers. Most kindergarten teachers know that the increased expectations are unsuitable for most five-year-old children.
- Among administrators, who must try to juggle everyone's expectations, but who often have a limited background in early childhood education, either through training or through teaching experience.

Desirable Characteristics of Kindergarten Programs

Hundreds of studies on the development of young children have been completed during the past two decades. This research has largely supported what, until recently, constituted the practice and content of kindergarten programs. The research also confirms that the course of the social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development of young children has not changed, in spite of major sociological and technological changes in our society. Developmental rates have not accelerated, nor are children more intelligent than they used to be--only the variety and intensity of early experiences have changed.

We know more now about how young children learn and can express that knowledge more professionally. This does not mean that the children are different because of it. Young children of today still need supportive environments geared to their needs rather than driven by inflexible curricula. If

schools are to adequately serve the unique educational needs of five-year-old children, a kindergarten should provide a place where:

- * Children are enrolled based upon their legal right to enter . . .
 - . . . not counseled to attend preschool or to wait a year because pre-screening suggests that many who are five are "not ready" for the program.
- * Parents and school personnel work cooperatively to build a partnership between home and school that will support the child throughout the school experience . . .
 - . . . not a place where the expectations of the parents and the school are in conflict or where parents feel isolated from their child's experience.
- * Children experience a planned, child-centered environment that encourages learning through exploration and discovery . . .
 - . . . not a sit-down-be-quiet classroom dominated by desks, paper, and workbooks.
- * Children have access to multilevel experiences and activities of varying degrees of complexity. They should be able to use concrete materials which allow for individual differences and natural variations in each one's ability to perform . . .
 - . . . not a place where all children are expected to perform the same task, reach the same level of performance, and accomplish the same objectives.
- * Children can make choices and decisions within the limits of the materials provided . . .
 - . . . not a largely teacher-directed room where children seldom choose.
- * Children learn there is often more than one right answer. Divergent thinking is developed and encouraged through use of open-ended materials and many informal conversations among the children and with adults . . .
 - . . . not a place where the day's activities are largely dominated by worksheets and discussions with predetermined answers.
- * The children's own language, experiences, and stages of development form the basis of reading and writing activities . . .
 - . . . not the almost universal use of commercial, formal pre-reading and early-reading programs.

- * Children learn to enjoy books and to appreciate literary language through a daily story time, creative dramatics, and repeated opportunities to hear and learn simple rhymes and other poems . . .
 . . . not a place where the day is too short for story time and the opportunity to appreciate literature comes only by way of educational television.
- * Children participate in daily, planned activities fostering both gross and fine motor development, including such activities as running, jumping, bouncing balls, lacing cards, hammering nails, playing with clay, etc. . . .
 . . . not a place where children are expected to sit quietly for long periods of time and perform fine motor skills beyond the current ability of many of them. For example, it is inappropriate to expect many five-year-old children to be able to form letters correctly on lined paper.
- * Children develop mathematical understanding through use of familiar manipulatives such as sand, water, unit blocks, counters, and other concrete materials . . .
 . . . not a place where children mark an X on the right answer in a workbook.
- * Children's curiosity about natural, familiar elements forms the basis of scientific observations, experimentation, and conclusions. Both planned and spontaneous interaction with real objects such as plants, animals, rocks, soil, water, etc., is considered to be essential . . .
 . . . not a place where science is included only when time permits or where the books tell outcomes and the teachers do the experiments.
- * Experimentation, enjoyment, and appreciation of varied forms of music are encouraged on a daily basis . . .
 . . . not a place where music is included only when time permits or the music teacher works with the class.
- * Many forms of art expression are encouraged through the use of a wide assortment of media integrated within the daily curriculum. The final product is never as important as the process of creating . . .
 . . . not a place where art usually consists of copying a model, coloring a ditto, or cutting and pasting a pattern, and/or where art is delegated to the specialist.
- * The mental and physical well-being of each child is of paramount importance . . .

. . . not a place where external pressures for group achievement, especially as measured by group achievement tests, are more important than the individual needs of children.

- * All the activities are planned to promote a positive self-image and attitude toward school and peers . . .

. . . not a place where the child's worth is measured only by his or her ability to conform to expectations.

- * Play is respected for its value as an appropriate learning medium for children of this age . . .

. . . not a place where play is deemphasized because the child "played enough" in preschool and should now be ready for "real" learning.

- * Different levels of ability and development are expected, valued, and accepted . . .

. . . not a place where attempts to narrow differences within a class or group through prescreening, entrance procedures, and transition classes result in de facto tracking.

Important Outcomes of Kindergarten

In order to encourage the development of kindergarten programs which meet the needs of both children and the larger community in which they live and grow, the State Board of Education encourages local boards of education to implement kindergarten programs which will help . . .

. . . children learn to work both alone and in cooperation with other children in both informal and more formal settings.

. . . children learn that the things of a classroom--toys, books, paints, blocks, easels, record player and records, computer, etc.--have both purposes and places. They learn how to use them and where to put them when the time comes to stop using them.

. . . children learn about rules--why we have them, how people (including children) make them, and how to follow the rules for the classroom and the school.

. . . children learn about time, taking turns, sharing, respecting the rights of others, responsibility, and about the role of the teacher as instructor, mediator, sustainer, counselor, and interpreter of rules.

. . . children increase their knowledge of language, especially the relationship between words and the things and processes they represent. As appropriate, individual children should begin to learn how speaking relates to writing and the two relate to what they say and do.

. . . children increase their knowledge of the number system and how it is related to quantities of real things in their environment--books, children, blocks, beans.

. . . children increase their knowledge of space and the things within that space--space and things in the classroom, space and things in the school, and space and things in the neighborhood.

. . . children increase their awareness of colors and shapes in nature and how these colors and shapes relate to the properties of real things in their environment.

. . . children learn about their bodies and how to keep them healthy and fit. They learn to develop strength, coordination, balance, dexterity, and motor control through active vigorous physical activity.

. . . children acquire and maintain excitement about learning. They look forward to continuing the learning process with a sense of wonder and anticipation.

Recommendations

An earlier section of this document elaborated on interwoven trends and practices which have produced unsuitable changes in kindergarten programs in recent years. Because the reasons for the changes are so complex, recommendations for improvement must be directed at the various entities which can be helpful in bringing about the positive redirection of kindergarten programs.

A. The State Department of Education should:

1. Provide for wide distribution of this position statement and urge its endorsement by interested organizations and groups.
2. Develop and seek support for legislation which will guarantee equal access to kindergarten programs in public schools for all five-year-old children in Nebraska.
3. Develop and distribute a curriculum guide for kindergarten which suggests suitable activities for five-year-old children and addresses concerns about articulation with later schooling.
4. Develop voluntary standards for early childhood programs (both preschool and kindergarten) to encourage quality in both public and private programs and to attempt to positively influence articulation between public kindergarten programs and the growing number of often nonprofessionally staffed private preschool programs.
5. Develop and distribute materials for administrators which provide current basic information about early childhood development and education.
6. Provide for regular department contact with kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators through workshops, consultation, newsletters, and information about exemplary materials and practices consistent with this position statement.

B. The Nebraska Council on Teacher Education should:

1. Expand the elementary education teacher training program criteria to include specific coursework in kindergarten/early childhood methods and materials as related to child growth and development. (Many of the practicing kindergarten teachers do not feel that general elementary methods courses were adequate to prepare them for teaching in kindergarten.)
2. Include practica and coursework in early childhood education as a part of the elementary and general administration program criteria.
3. Reconsider the current criteria for the early childhood endorsement in light of the new National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards.

C. Approved teacher training institutions should:

1. Regularly offer kindergarten/early childhood courses and practica required by the program approval criteria of the Nebraska Council on Teacher Education. Practica should closely link experience with course content.
2. Regularly provide kindergarten/early childhood courses in summer and evening sessions to accommodate practicing elementary teachers and administrators.
3. Provide personnel to teach such courses who are optimally prepared in early childhood development and education.
4. Encourage elementary education students interested primarily in working with young children to pursue an additional endorsement in early childhood education. (Nine of the fifteen Nebraska teacher training institutions offer this endorsement program.)

D. The central administration and building level administrators in local school districts should:

1. Become informed about the growth and development of young children and about kindergarten/early childhood education.
2. Recommend policies to local boards which acknowledge children's constitutional right to free public education at age five and which encourage parents to enroll eligible children.
3. With the participation of elementary administrators and kindergarten teachers, recommend kindergarten curriculum goals to local boards which are consistent with the characteristics of five-year-old children's growth and development.

4. Limit prescreening of kindergarten children to the identification of handicapping conditions and/or gaining information about the learning needs of incoming students. (If such testing is deemed necessary, it is most valid when conducted just prior to or just after the opening of school.)
5. Avoid the trend to group children perceived to be "less ready" in special classes. (These are often called transition rooms, developmental, or readiness kindergartens. Educational research continues to support heterogeneous grouping over homogeneous grouping as most beneficial for children.)
6. Attempt to hire and/or assign to the kindergarten teachers who hold an early childhood endorsement or who have significant specific preparation to teach kindergarten.
7. Work to create a climate which diminishes the pressure teachers feel from those teaching at higher grade levels. (Although this is often cited as a problem by teachers at all levels, kindergarten teachers bear the weight of the entire system.)
8. Assist and support the kindergarten teacher in interpreting the goals and program of the kindergarten to parents.
9. Discourage the purchase and use of kindergarten instructional materials that consist primarily of worksheets, workbooks, and similar non-concrete materials. Provide support for the selection of varied age-appropriate materials for the kindergarten classroom.
10. Consider holding periodic meetings for parents of preschool-age children. Such meetings would provide a forum for parents to learn about appropriate expectations for their young children. Contact with parents of preschool children would also assist in the early identification of handicapped children.
11. Provide incentives for currently assigned kindergarten teachers to expand their knowledge of kindergarten/early childhood education through professional growth activities.

E. Kindergarten teachers should:

1. Participate in professional growth activities which expand knowledge of child growth and development and kindergarten/early childhood education.
2. Explore the suitability of adding the early childhood endorsement. (Seventeen percent of current kindergarten teachers hold an early childhood endorsement.)
3. Recommend the purchase of varied, age-appropriate materials for the kindergarten classroom. (Many kindergarten teachers cite the need to reduce the use of workbooks, worksheets, and other non-concrete materials.)

4. Participate in early childhood professional organizations in order to gain the support of peers in advocating for quality kindergarten/early childhood programs.
- F. Parents of preschool and kindergarten-age children should:
1. Become informed about the programs and services available to children in public school districts.
 2. Expect that the public school will provide a kindergarten program suited to the learning needs of five-year-olds and will welcome all children who reach age five by October 15.
 3. Develop reasonable expectations for their children which are suitable for each child's age and stage of development.
 4. Take advantage of developmental evaluation services available to all children through local public school districts, if the growth and development of a child of any age appears to be impaired in any way.

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